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## FRANCE BEFORE THE WAR

Now that France has triumphed over Germany, the eyes of all nations are turned toward her and all tongues are ready to do her homage. To a certain extent this courtship is doubtless to be set down to the world-old custom of acclaiming the victor irrespective of the cause. How clearly we saw this in Germany's case after the war of 1870-1871! But if it be true that her rival got something more than her due of the world's applause after that war, surely France got something less. We Anglo-Saxons, in particular, were apt to think too lightly of French manhood and to question whether the French possessed the deeper moral and ethical qualities which command our respect. At the bottom of this injustice done to the French was, above all, our inability to get close to a shy and elusive people, who do not, as we may think, carry their hearts on their sleeves, and whose ready speech and facile manners only serve the better to disguise their inner selves.

It is the present writer's desire to tell something of what he has seen around him in the France after the war. What has interested him most is the reconstruction going forward there, a reconstruction not merely in houses, factories and railways, but also in business and industrial methods. For the Great War has made the French conscious as never before that their civilization might be first in producing humanists, artists and pure scientists, and yet that it is lagging behind that of other nations in developing captains and organizers of industry, enterprising and resourceful merchants, and a laboring class both well cared for and efficient. The French, in short, are alive to the fact that their organization of society, brilliant as it is, is inharmoniously developed, and that with its present imperfections it cannot maintain them where they have the right and duty to be, among the most progressive of the great nations. It is greatly to the credit of the French that, having ascertained their shortcomings, they are fearless and unsparing in publicly acknowledging and denouncing them. Look through French publications appearing both during and after the war, and you will

find a large proportion devoted to criticism of French defects, real or supposed. Follow the debates in the legislature or the speeches of the ministers. Note the laws passed or proposed: everywhere you will perceive a desire to remedy and to reform in all things.

There is no more hopeful or more healthful symptom in the morale of a nation than this willingness to confess its faults, together with a determination to prepare the way for better things. The French have known in the very midst of war how to improvise efficiency out of inefficiency, so that they could meet and conquer the Germans. Surely they will know in like manner how to meet and conquer the great industrial and economic problems that beset their future.

This is the first of three papers. It will briefly discuss the genius and the characteristics, the qualities and the defects of the race; in other words, the human factors in reconstruction. The second will be devoted to the changes brought about by the Great War and to the problems created by it. The final paper will deal with France's material and moral resources as assets in the work of rebuilding and as promises for the future.

In area France is smaller than our State of Texas, but surpasses that country or any other country of like size and compactness in the remarkable diversity of her agricultural and food products, and also in the excellence yet variety of her climate. Indeed France, with her exceptional resources of soil and climate, will, regardless of any industrial revolution she may undergo, remain until the end of time an agricultural country relying upon the rich output of her soil. To be sure, the average French farmer is a backward, ignorant peasant who has hitherto made little use of improved cultivating machinery and of those fertilizers best adapted to the soil. Judged by the high agricultural standards of old Europe, he has much to learn, for he draws from better ground less than the well-trained German from poorer, not to mention the results achieved by the model farmers of Denmark or Holland. All the more reason, however, for looking forward to a bright agricultural future for France when scientific farming comes into more general use. Signs of this are not wanting. And certainly where standardizing of methods

and machinery plays a small part, but personal skill a considerable one, as in horticulture and market-gardening, the French cultivator will be found second to none.

One should emphasize the rich fertility of France, for she was, before the war, at any rate, a land of fat and plenty and ease, where the spur of pressure of population upon subsistence had not yet driven a very large proportion of her inhabitants into manufacturing, for she produced bread enough to feed her own population. It was a land where good living and good wines were cheap, and so, too, were music and the stage and all the delightful things that the fine or the decorative arts could furnish. Indeed, this æsthetic people, who seem to love art more than comfort, had multiplied beautiful things and dealt them out with considered thrift, so that they were within the reach of all but the poorest.

Economically France was a land of small landowners, small *rentiers*,<sup>1</sup> small merchants, bankers, and manufacturers, and comparatively few great corporations and few big enterprises.

Temperamentally, although they loved money as much as men of other races, the French preferred to earn a franc by saving rather than to gain two by risk and worry. At a time when other nations were organizing huge corporations and export banks, and were playing big stakes for supremacy in the world's trade, French commercial men and French factory-owners, were, as a rule, satisfied to stay at home, and, behind the wall of a high tariff which protected both the farmer and the manufacturer, contented themselves with the smaller, but safer and steadier profits of the home market.

This extreme conservatism in business and banking surprised foreigners who had business dealings with the French. The big French banking institutions would invest billions at home and abroad in the shares of old-established companies, but hardly find a sou to lend to those who wanted to launch new industrial undertakings on French soil. France owned, after Great Britain, the greatest colonial empire. But the French saw themselves being ousted from the trade of most of their own colonies by the

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<sup>1</sup> That is, persons of independent means and of leisure.

superior enterprise and daring of their foreign competitors. Carthage, Rome, England and Germany had risen to greatness through commerce rather than through the arts, but France, so great in the arts, seemed to have a "craven fear of being great" in the field of industry. "You French have a huckster's outlook on the world", once said a foreign friend to Monsieur Paul Gaultier. There might be just enough of truth in this humorous exaggeration for it to wound.<sup>2</sup>

It might be interesting to suggest a few reasons why the French have been handicapped in the race for industrial supremacy among the nations. In the first place, as they themselves are fond of saying, they are too individualistic in temperament, and too much inclined each to pull his own way and distrust his neighbor, for them to march and work together in fruitful voluntary collaboration and collective enterprise. The French feel, in fact, that they must be drilled and regimented by some outside force, *i. e.*, the State, in order to accomplish big things. Hence their natural instinct is to turn to the State, and many still have great faith in State control and State ownership.

It seems a paradox to say that the most society-loving and sociable people on earth should be deficient in capacity for co-öperation or for team work. But if they are sociable they are not socially minded. It is one thing, as Paul Gaultier<sup>3</sup> points out, to excel in the social arts and in conversation, which flourish through the jealous care that each one takes in setting off his or her personality to best advantage, and in competing for applause through witty expressions and original ideas, and it is quite another thing to have the self-subordinating spirit that prompts the formation of works of collective utility and carries them out to successful issue.

Of course, the excessive development of French bureaucracy, of State ownership or control, and of paternalism generally in government, has not originated alone in the tendency of each Frenchman to take care of himself, and leave to the State the

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Gaultier: *Notre Examen de Conscience*, p. 99. See also in Professor Fernand Baldensperger: *L'Avant-Guerre dans la Littérature Française*, pp. 20. ff., a charmingly written passage on French pre-war life and characteristics.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Gaultier: *op. cit.*, p. 28.

duty of attending to the interests of all. The needs of national defence account for, and justify to a certain extent, the mighty and over-centralized French bureaucracy. But none the less paternalism goes on accentuating the already existing trend to isolated action. In this respect, however, a healthy reaction has been setting in.

Another reason why French industrial development has suffered is to be found in French educational and vocational ideals, and in the very brilliancy of French civilization itself. The best brains of the nation have not, as a rule, as with us in the United States, been devoted to the industrial development of the country and to the organization of big business, but rather to the "liberal arts" and to the "liberal professions",—to literature, art, science, medicine and law. This expression, the "liberal arts", has a real meaning in a country where, before the Great War, nearly every intellectual wrote disdainfully of commercial pursuits and looked upon the magnificent industrial growth of the United States or Germany with indifference if not with secret contempt. With us, great railroad-builders, iron and steel men, financiers, mine-owners, and manufacturers, such as Carnegie, Harriman, Morgan or Ford, not only earn enormous pecuniary rewards but fame also, and the admiration of millions. In France, hitherto, such a thing would be well-nigh impossible. There is no such glorification of industrial achievement over there, and men of the type of those just named would be treated by French literary men who set the tone and taste in their country, as birds of prey. Indeed, had France entered upon a career of great industrial and commercial expansion, it would have been, to the thinking of the writers just named, a lowering of her civilization and of her ideals.<sup>4</sup> One readily sees, therefore, that in spite of her liberal political institutions France is not yet socially democratized. To be sure, the same might be said of almost any other European country where modes of speech, and usages and customs dating

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<sup>4</sup>"Lysis": *L'Erreur française*, p. 7. 1918. Fernand Baldensperger: *L'Avant-Guerre dans la Littérature française*, pp. 62-63. 1919. The article by Robert Pinot entitled *Le Chef dans la grande industrie* in *Revue de France*, 15 March, 1921. "Testis": *Documents sur l'Invasion Economique de la France*, pp. 13 ff. 1918.

back a thousand years have preserved distinctions between man and man. But one expected a little more of the country which first gave to old Europe the watchwords, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Although the difference between commoner and noble has been almost wiped out in France, there still is a distinct separation between the manual laborer and the intellectual worker, and the laboring classes resent this keenly. The word 'bourgeois', referring as it does to the great class of producers and distributors of wealth, should be an honorable appellation, but in the mouth of the 'upper classes', as in the speech of the laboring man, 'bourgeois' is often used as a reproachful and odious distinction, meaning sordid and selfish. The French word '*peuple*' without a qualifying adjective, has a different connotation from our good English word 'people', for it usually signifies the lower classes only.

Of course, this cleavage between 'manual' and 'intellectual' stands in the way of progress, for it prevents a complete co-operation between workman and employer. Undoubtedly one of the finest features of our American civilization is the almost complete levelling of barriers of caste, the almost total absence of class-feeling—in short, the universal respect for the common manhood in each American citizen. Doubtless such social blessings can only be vouchsafed to a relatively newly settled and thinly populated country: they are due to the spirit of the frontier. Nevertheless, their value as a social asset bulks enormously to Americans who see and experience the class struggles and class bitterness of old Europe. Senator Lazare Weiller has been recently writing in a Strasburg paper his *Souvenirs d'Amérique*. He tells us he was agreeably surprised to find in the United States that laboring men, as such, do not, as in Continental Europe, form great radical, and often revolutionary, political parties with platforms advocating the overthrow of the existing order of things. On the contrary, what struck him most was that American workmen had "a fine sense of their own worth, so that they did not suffer the bitterness and the meanness of class envy, an inestimable boon". As Senator Weiller puts it, the whole effort of the laboring masses in America is to rise from a lower to a higher level. Far from objecting to silk

hats or frock coats, as the livery of the hated bourgeoisie, they invested in these articles, when they could afford them, to attain greater respectability.<sup>5</sup>

Contrast this attitude with the petty, envious spirit of the French workingman as illustrated in the following incident related recently to the writer in Paris by a social worker, a trained and cultured French woman. She told him that she had adopted as her own daughters two little girls of the working-class. She educated them and gave them every comfort. Their parents were living and the little girls were frequently permitted to visit them. But, as the oldest girl confessed, she never saw her father without hearing him attack her 'bourgeois' foster-mother, whom she had constantly to 'defend'. So strong was this purely class prejudice on the part of the parents, and so uncomfortable did the situation finally become for the lady, that she saw herself at last compelled to separate from her adopted children. Of course, it will be said that one incident proves little and that this is an extreme case. The writer, however, who has lived for many years in France, knows from his own experience with the French working-classes that it is typical of the sentiments entertained by a considerable proportion of them. The chief ambition of the radical leaders of the laboring classes in Europe, including the French, is to pull down those above them. De Tocqueville remarked long ago that the Frenchman's idea of equality was that no one should be better off than himself.

As was remarked above, French education, secondary education in particular, is in part responsible for keeping up social inequalities. Certainly, the instruction imparted in the French lycées, or high schools, is, in some respects, altogether admirable. In developing in young men fine humanistic culture through a study of the classics, French educators aim at increasing and perpetuating the literary and artistic gifts with which the race has been at all times so liberally endowed. Moreover, with such a training, there will always be in France a large intellectual *élite* capable of taking an intelligent part in the world's great

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<sup>5</sup>Lazare Weiller: *Souvenirs d'Amérique, Journal d'Alsace et de Lorraine*, 16 June, 1921.



social and humanitarian problems and contributing to their solution. Yet, in spite of these advantages, which place France foremost among the nations that labor for the common good of humanity, the French educational system is still one-sided and undemocratic. It seems to accept as inevitable the old distinction between the manual labor of the artisans and the intellectual work of the professional men, and to train boys to fit themselves exclusively for the one or the other. Humanistic studies are usually barred to the child of the working-class, however gifted he be, because he lacks pecuniary means to pursue them; nor could he, until quite recently, and now only in limited measure, enjoy advanced professional and technical instruction.<sup>6</sup> To put one's finger on the weak spot in French national education as a whole, one must say that France has hitherto overdeveloped the humanistic and æsthetic side at the expense of the economic and practical side. Whether or not the moral expansion of a nation will, in the long run, be dependent on, and supported by, its material and industrial growth,<sup>7</sup> at any rate, no nation can morally afford to be indifferent to such growth.

Let us now leave the economic factors in the reconstruction of France and consider the moral and ethical ones. For on the virile qualities and on the strength of character of the French themselves much will depend. Before the war it used to be a common figure of speech among the Germans that France was a 'woman-nation', possessing the finer feminine qualities, such as delicacy, tact and taste, but that Germany typified the 'masculine' virtues, such as brawn, push, organizing and business ability, and capacity for leadership. Many, too, who are not Germans, and who professed to love France, deplored that the French still regretted the loss of their once proud position in the world. According to these good friends, France should, in the interest of the world's peace, give up striving to obtain an important share in the world's trade, or a big fleet or a large colonial empire. She should frankly acknowledge German or British or American 'superiority' in

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<sup>6</sup> L. Fernand Agnès: *La Réforme de l'Enseignement National*, in *La Revue du Mois*, 10 March, 1920, pp. 228 ff.

<sup>7</sup> G. Hersent: *La Réforme de l'Education Nationale*, p. 68. 1917.

these manlier pursuits, and smilingly content herself with cultivating the fine arts, and ruling over the world of fashion, decadent yet graceful, as was the effeminate Greek among the sterner Romans.<sup>8</sup> The Great War, by testing the French at every point of their military, economic and political strength, and in their moral fibre, brushed aside for all time the silly 'woman-nation' theory, and gave the lie to the assertion that the French were decadent. But there still remains the accusation that the French are an 'immoral' people; that their young men are invariably unchaste and dissipated; that husbands and wives are normally unfaithful to each other; that contemporary French literature, and the French stage in particular, have no moral ideals and often are lewd. From this state of affairs the consequences are deduced that the French race is dying out, not only because the young men of the country are stunted in their growth by immoral habits, but because they later carry these habits into their marriage relations, so largely accounting for the sterility of most French families. The indictment thus stated is obviously exaggerated. In particular the small size of French families may be traced to other causes as well, for we see the same dearth of children in New England households—not to mention other countries—yet no one accuses the New Englanders of being particularly immoral. If, however, the depopulation of France may not be laid at the door of French morality, that morality itself cannot, we fear, be successfully defended. We trust that we admit and understand all that may be said in favor of the French in this respect, or against ourselves, although, of course, retorts of 'you, too' are no argument. Let us admit, then, that we Anglo-Saxons often show a foolish and false shame, particularly in alluding to the care and hygiene of the body, and that the French are in this respect saner and wiser than we are. Let us admit also that, with us, men in practice often act as though there were two standards of conduct, one for themselves and one for women, whereas they preach but one. In this respect the French are certainly superior to us, for they preach not at all. Moreover they frankly admit that there may be two standards

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<sup>8</sup> "Agathon": *Les Jeunes Gens d'Aujourd'hui*, pp. 126-127. 1912.

of conduct. We think that a subject may be immoral *per se* because it is suggestive, and that therefore it should be taboo. The French see no cause for tabooing a subject merely because it might inspire somebody with evil thoughts. That would be a confession of inability to face the bald truth, and the French pride themselves on their intellectual honesty and fearlessness. Besides, why confess to such ready susceptibility to temptation?

Yet when all is said, and with all due allowance for our different points of view, the truth compels us to say that no other modern country makes such a display of its sexuality as France.<sup>9</sup> The sexual appeal pursues one in lascivious painting and sculpture, even in statues in public squares or adorning public buildings. It stares at one from posters, advertisements, and in shop-window displays. Contemporary drama is full of it, and so is the modern novel. It seems to leave its salacious trace everywhere. There is a reaction going on against this sort of thing in France. More marriages and more children would give a healthier tone to the moral atmosphere, which owes its corruption perhaps chiefly to a huge bachelor class more than to any other one circumstance. M. Klotz, before the Great War, estimated the number of bachelors over thirty years of age at 1,350,000. From these men are very largely recruited the critics, the playwrights, the journalists, the novelists, and also, to a considerable extent, the governing class of the country. They impose their flippant morality on the French stage. Up to twenty-four or twenty-five years of age young men in France, as elsewhere, look up to womanhood, and cherish some ideals on the subject.<sup>10</sup> But these old cynics have long since lost such sentiments, and it is largely due to them that women, as such, are so little respected in France, notwithstanding the elaborate forms of superficial courtesy with which society ladies are surrounded.<sup>11</sup> Nothing, however, could be more unjust than to suppose French society morally rotten. The French stage and French romance do not aim primarily at

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<sup>9</sup> The words of a foreign savant to M. Charles Gide. Paul Bureau: *L'Indiscipline des Mœurs*, p. 6. 1922.

<sup>10</sup> Georges Rossignol: *Un pays de Célibataires et de Fils uniques*, pp. 26-27. 1913. Paul Bureau: *L'Indiscipline dans les Mœurs*, pp. 350. 1920.

<sup>11</sup> Rossignol: *Ibid.*

picturing typical French life. The writers of plays and novels are by no means concerned at holding up the mirror to society, but very much concerned in giving full rein to their own dramatic and artistic instincts, and in taking a virtuoso's pleasure in pushing human passions to their last limits, or in tangling up their characters into impossible situations. Nothing being so abhorrent to a Frenchman as the preaching or didactic manner, art is cultivated only for art's sake, and the devil take the consequences. In short, French society is very much better than one would ever dream from a knowledge of French literature and art. In no country is family life more strongly organized by law and by custom, nor better lived than in France. Take the average bourgeois household, and by 'bourgeois' we mean the great mass of people engaged either in the liberal professions, or in business big or little, or in the service of the State. Is there in any country a closer, finer companionship between husband and wife, more devoted and more intimate relations between parents and children, than among the French middle classes? Compare the French with ourselves, for instance. The American wife is probably more often than the French away from home and husband. The French father is usually a better comrade and companion to his sons and daughters than the American. Whatever may be their anti-social traits in other respects, the French have an admirable sense of family solidarity. This appears in many ways. How hard will a French parent work, how much will he or she sacrifice and save to endow each child, and particularly marriageable daughters, with independent means! There may be various reasons for the stationary population of France, but the desire to see each child brought into the world amply provided for is certainly one. In the bourgeois classes, at any rate, parents simply will not have daughters to whom they cannot give a dowry, nor sons whom they cannot set up in business.

In respect of his family life the Frenchman, who is so largely endowed with Latin speech and Latin culture is, to this day, a Roman. The family is a miniature society, and its recognized head is the *père-de-famille*, or paterfamilias, to whom respect is due both by law and by custom. The saint's day and birthday, as well as the confirmation and marriage of each member, are cele-

brated in common. French society, so lenient toward the immoral young man, frowns upon the immoral father or mother of a family.

In closing this paper, we may sum up by saying that nature, as though by predilection, had enriched France with every excellence of soil and climate, and had thus rendered easy the material task of providing for a living. Thus the French found leisure to devote themselves to the Muses with such success that the world was illuminated by the radiance of their culture. Then came the war, sweeping away their existing stocks of materials and demanding the swift and swifter production of more. By an almost miraculous energy the French met the call and stood the test. They had shown unexpected creative and organizing powers, but also dangerous economic waste and inefficiency. It now became clear to them that, to lift themselves out of the morass of bankruptcy into which the war had cast them, and to prepare the way for an industrial rebirth which alone could save them, they must remodel their whole social organization, and reform their educational methods. Fortunately their courage is high and their mental and moral qualities are equal to the task. We shall see in a subsequent paper how the struggle for reorganization is being carried on and what is being accomplished.

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